

Housing Issues Facing Somali Refugees in Minneapolis, MN

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1. Introduction

Somali immigrants face many obstacles when finding housing that suits their needs and more can be done to improve their housing conditions and options. Minnesota is home to the largest Somali population in the United States and most of them live in the Minneapolis area. As a matter of fact, more than half of the Somalis coming to the United States settle in Minnesota with the majority of these living in the Twin Cities. Of these immigrants, many are refugees that came from horrific conditions living in refugee camps due to an unstable central government in Somalia. Since 1991, Somalia has been split into four separate areas and political persecution a constant fear of many Somalis. Many Somalis have died due to the ongoing conflict between political beliefs and many survivors have fled to refugee camps where they live in poor conditions waiting and hoping that the government will eventually stabilize. Some of these refugees fled to other countries and many come to the United States to be free from the fear of being killed because of their political views.

When these Somali immigrants arrive in Minnesota they are coming to a place very foreign to them and are in desperate need to find somewhere they can go to find help and to meet people they can relate to. In order for them to have a smooth transition into their new life here it is of extreme importance they have somewhere to turn for help. This is why I am

recommending improvements to how the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority helps Somali refugees find housing in Minneapolis. Affordable housing is an essential component for refugees to become successful in the United States. We can do more to make their transition into the United States successful and give them a better opportunity to make a better life for themselves in this country.

By expanding the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority's Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program the Somali community can be better served. Inadequate housing among Somalis due to poor housing conditions has many negative consequences. Low income communities are already at a higher risk of disease and other health issues and adding poor housing to the mix makes their health threats even worse. Poor housing conditions have been linked to obesity, mental health problems, high exposures to lead, and development of asthma due to mold, dust, and moisture. By simply providing safe and affordable housing to this community they can stay healthy so they are able to find jobs and education where they can get out of poverty and then provide further benefits to society. Adequate housing will not only bring improvements to health but also create a more stable family life.

My other recommendation focuses on establishing a special group of employees working directly with Somalis as a part of the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority. Doing so will help Somali immigrants new to Minnesota

find housing and also refer them to organizations that can help them find jobs and provide them with referrals on how to access health care.

Establishing such a group will also give the immigrants someone they can rely on when they need someone to turn to for help. The many Somali organizations in the Twin Cities area can be confusing for someone not familiar with the area. Having one point of contact for Somalis to access information and help will be a great benefit for many people.

These recommendations need to be considered in order to improve the Somali community's success in Minnesota. The problems these immigrants face can be overcome and by helping these people the greater Minnesota community will benefit because of increased tax revenue and a healthier, more educated Somali community.

2. Literature Review

There have been many studies done related to the ongoing problem of lower income families trying to find affordable housing. Most of the literature focuses on all ethnic groups and there are not many studies focusing strictly on this issue in relation to Somali immigrants. I review these articles below.

Robert Murdie's article looked at both Polish and Somali immigrant groups entering Toronto between 1987 and 1994 (Murdie, 2003). Murdie

used a questionnaire to gather data regarding what difficulties the immigrant groups faced when finding housing in Toronto and gathered further demographic data of the immigrant groups. Murdie used data from the questionnaire to compare the housing careers of Polish and Somali immigrants and found that the immigrant groups had very different experiences. Polish immigrants were more successful at finding housing and eventually moved on to larger units while Somali families were more likely to move into smaller units over time. Murdie believed the reasons for the difference in successfully finding and improving housing conditions between the two groups was in the socioeconomic conditions of the two groups. He found the educational achievement and income level were both lower in the Somali group and they also relied more on public assistance than the Polish immigrants. Another difference was the Somali families were much larger which made it more difficult to find housing units that were affordable and of acceptable quality. These issues facing Somalis in Toronto a few years ago are very much the same issues facing Somali refugees in Minneapolis.

Adrienne Champon (Champon, 1997) published an article looking at the housing experiences of Somalis, Russians, and Hispanics in Toronto. This article explains what barriers exist in finding adequate housing for recent immigrants and how significant each barrier can be for each immigrant group. These barriers are further broken down into primary and secondary barriers. Primary barriers such as skin color, age, ethnicity,

gender, age, and disability are impossible to break and secondary barriers such as income level, source of income, knowledge of housing system, language, and household type and size can be changed over time. Champon uses these barriers and ranks them in order of importance based on his findings. For Somalis, the ranking order is as follows:

1. Level of income (secondary barrier)
2. Color of skin (primary barrier)
3. Source of income (secondary barrier)
4. Ethnicity (primary barrier)
5. Knowledge of housing system (secondary barrier)
6. Gender (primary barrier)
7. Language (secondary barrier)
8. Household type and size (secondary barrier)
9. Knowledge of institutions and culture (secondary barrier)
10. Experience with the dominant culture (secondary barrier)

From the above list, and assuming that these barriers exist for Somalis living across North America, it is easy to see why it can be so difficult for Somalis to be successful in finding affordable housing. The primary barriers, such as color of skin, ethnicity and gender all rank very high on the list. These primary barriers cannot be changed and can help explain how some Somalis may face discrimination based on these factors. Other secondary barriers

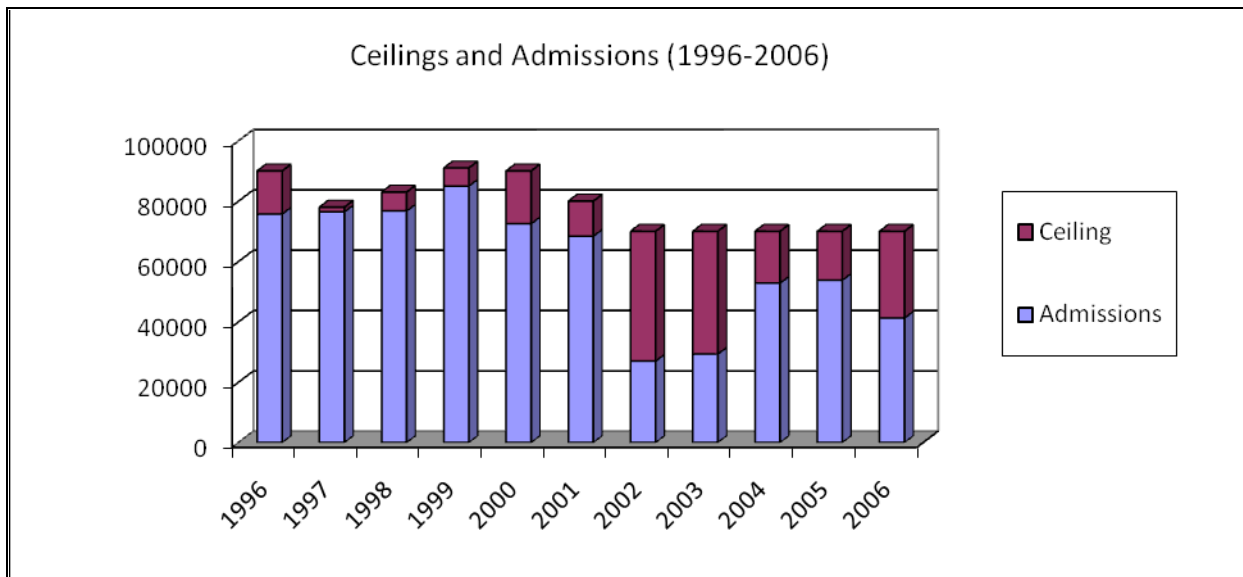
such as level and source of income and knowledge of housing system can be changed. Helping Somalis make these changes is critical in helping them find affordable housing.

Shio (2006) did an extensive study on the housing careers of Somali immigrants in Minneapolis and found similar results of the studies done by Murdie and Champon. Shio concluded that Somalis in Minneapolis face problems finding affordable housing due to barriers such as "lack of education and relevant job skills, lack of information on housing opportunities, refugee status, and language" (Shio, 2006).

By looking at these studies it is clear Somalis have a distinct disadvantage to other groups when finding affordable housing. Characteristics such as socioeconomic status, skin color, and education affect Somalis more than some other immigrant groups. These characteristics are all cited in the studies as reasons Somalis may have a more difficult time finding affordable housing when compared to other immigrant groups. As Murdie and Champon both point out, level of income is a primary reason Somalis have a hard time finding affordable housing. The level of income will unlikely change unless education and language skills are improved for Somalis having a difficult time finding housing.

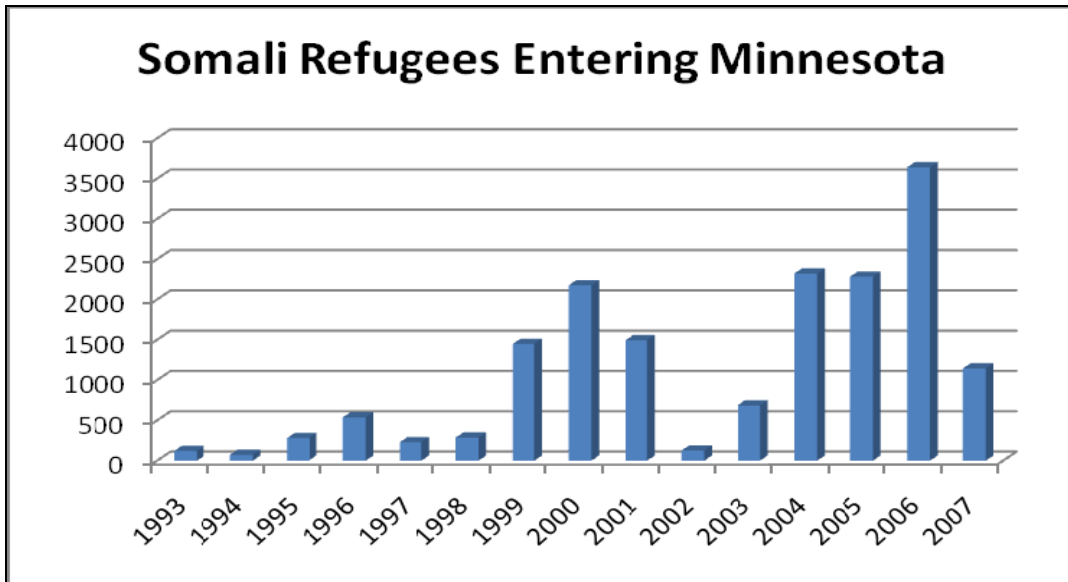
3. Background and Demographics of Somalis in Minneapolis

Due to political instability throughout the world, refugees have been fleeing their homelands in search for a better life in other countries. The United States is one destination many refugees have relocated to. The United States sets a limit (ceiling) on how many refugees are allowed to enter the country every year. As the graph below shows the ceiling has been below 100,000 for the past 10 years and most years the number entering the country is well under the maximum allowable to enter. This is especially true since 2001.



Source: ORR Report to Congress 2006

In Minnesota many of these refugees are from Somalia. The Somali community has been growing in Minnesota for the past few decades largely because of the increasing number of immigrants coming here as refugees. Because Somalia has not had a stable central government since the early 1990s, the number of refugees does not appear like it will be decreasing any time soon. This will likely lead to a steady number of new refugees leaving refugee camps for a new start in the United States; specifically Minneapolis. The current population estimate of Somalis in Minnesota varies greatly based on who is giving the information, and the exact number is almost impossible to determine. According to the 2000 census, the current Somali population in Minnesota was 11,164 but that number likely underestimates the current Somali population a great deal. As the chart below shows, there has been a large number of Somali refugees coming to Minnesota since 2000 so the number is actually much higher.



Source: Refugee Health Statistics: Minnesota Department of Health

Using the data from the 2000 U. S. Census and the Refugee Health Statistics data from the chart it can be estimated there are about 25,000 Somalis in Minnesota as of 2007. This estimate also likely underestimates the actual Somali population living in Minnesota. Some Somali residents living in Minnesota estimate 70,000 Somalis are currently living in Minnesota, although it is hard to know the exact number due to the difficulty in obtaining accurate data.

There are many reasons Somalis choose to settle in the Twin Cities instead of other areas of the United States. The large Somali population here helps attract many new refugees because people new to this country will feel more comfortable if they are in a community with people coming from their same situation. The availability of jobs in the area and the availability of

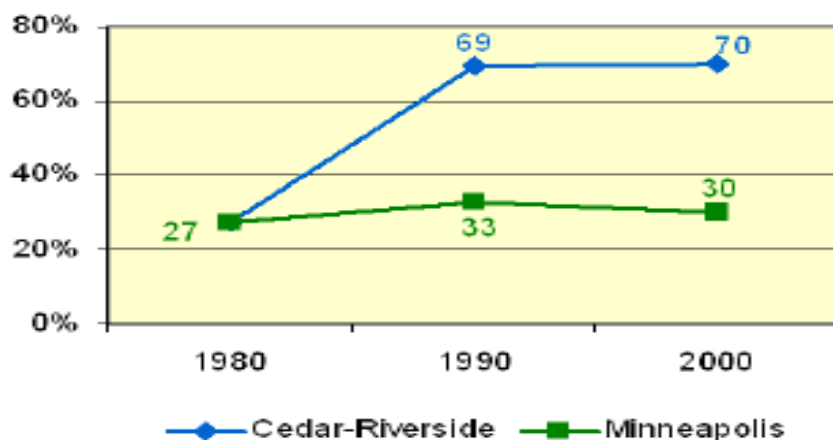
social services serving the Somali community are also factors. There are many jobs for new refugees and with the established Somali community there are also several social service agencies. The Somalis new to Minnesota are also fairly well educated compared to some other immigrant groups. According to a survey by the Wilder Foundation (Mattessich, 2000) approximately 2/3 of the Somali refugees entering Minnesota have at least a high school education and of those, 22% have college degrees or higher which is less than Minnesota residents overall.

According to the Department of Homeland Security, 6,251 Somalis were given permanent resident status in 2007 and of these, 1,801 were living in Minnesota (DHS, 2006). This clearly shows just how many Somalis prefer to move to Minnesota compared to the rest of the United States. Additionally, in 2004 there were 13,331 Somalis admitted into the United States as refugees. This was more than any other country with refugees entering the United States; Liberia came in second with only 7,140.

With the increasing number of Somali immigrants in Minnesota, the demand for affordable housing also increases since many of the Somali families in Minneapolis make so little money. The Cedar Riverside neighborhood in Minneapolis consists of a foreign born population of 45% according to the 2000 U. S. Census and most of these foreign born residents are Somali (U. S. Census, 2000). According to Youth Program Manager at the Brian Coyle Center, Abdirahman Mukhtar, (Mukhtar, 2009) the median

household income for Somali families living in the Cedar Riverside neighborhood is \$14,367 and the unemployment rate is 17%. With such low incomes and high unemployment rates, it is very difficult for many Somali immigrants to find housing for their families that meet their needs. What makes things worse for Somali immigrants is that data shows there is a shortage of affordable housing units for low income families through 2010 of over 98,000 families (Housing Minnesota, 2004). This shortage is sure to grow with an increase of new immigrants and an increase of income spent on housing costs. According to the City of Minneapolis, housing costs as a percentage of income in the Cedar Riverside neighborhood have increased from 27% in 1980 to 70% in 2000 (Cedar Riverside, 2000). This could be due to increases in rent or decreases in the incomes of people living in the area. It is more likely a combination of the two since housing costs have rose and incomes of people living in the area have more than likely decreased with the increase in immigrant population.

Cedar-Riverside / Minneapolis Median housing costs as a percentage of median household income



Source: Minneapolis Community Planning and Economic Development
with data from the U.S. Census of Population and Housing (SF3)

Without a home to live in, many families face the problem of living on the street or finding housing with family members or friends. This can lead to overcrowded housing units which can lead to a variety of significant health issues such as elevated lead levels, asthma, and obesity from poor eating habits. "Bad housing is the number one environmental health risk to children in America," says Richard Jackson, director of the Centers for Disease Control's National Center for Environmental Health (Jones, 2003). Overcrowding tends to be a problem for Somali families even when they are able to find housing on their own.

The family structure of Somali families may be the most difficult barrier to overcome when finding available housing units. Somali families tend to be larger than most American families. The average size of a Somali

household is 3.90 (Remington, 2008) while the average size of all Minnesota households is 2.25 (U. S. Census, 2000). This represents a 73% larger household size than the average Minnesotan household and helps explain how difficult it can be for Somali families to find housing because they require larger homes than most Minnesotans. This also likely underestimates the number of people living in each housing unit since it is not uncommon for extended family members to all be living together in one home or apartment.

There are a limited number of available homes for rent in Minneapolis. According to the 2000 U.S Census there was 168,606 total housing units in Minneapolis of various sizes. About half of these, 51.4% were owner occupied which makes 48.6% (81,943) rental properties. Of these housing units only 3.9% (3,196), were vacant and available for rent. With the large number of new immigrants arriving in Minneapolis each year, the supply of available housing probably does not meet the demand for housing for recently arrived immigrants.

Using the average estimate of the number of Somalis in Minnesota, 45,000, it is possible to show the need for more housing units in Minneapolis that fit their needs. Since the average family size of Somalis in Minneapolis is 3.9 it can be estimated there are approximately 11,500 households currently living in the Minneapolis area. This creates a huge strain on the multiple bedroom rental market. According to the American Housing Survey

(AHS, 2007) only 19% of rental housing units in the Minneapolis area are 3 bedrooms or larger.

Using this information it is clear to see how hard it can be to place 11,500 households in so few available homes which are in demand for non-immigrants as well. The small average number of rooms in these homes is also an obstacle these immigrant families are facing. With an average family size of almost 4 it is difficult for many Somali immigrants to find housing that is both safe and affordable.

Many Somali refugees who just arrived in Minneapolis would have no income source for many months after they first arrive if not for the government assistance they receive. They come here lacking many of the skills that are required for most jobs and the majority of them don't speak English well, if at all. To overcome this hardship there are numerous cash assistance programs to help people after first arriving to the United States. For example, if the refugee has children, they may meet requirements for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program. If they are disabled they may be eligible to receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI). For those who are single and not disabled there are other benefits they might be eligible for such as Refugee Cash Assistance and Refugee Medical Assistance Programs (ORR, 2006). These programs are limited to 8 months for most people so it is important these new refugees look for work immediately upon entering the country.

For many Somalis finding work can be a difficult task. They lack many of the necessary skills required for various jobs and in many cases must settle for lower paying jobs. The ORR estimates that in Minnesota 52% of their known cases entered employment at some point with an average wage of \$9.00 an hour (ORR, 2006). They also estimate that of those employed, only 20% obtained a job that provided them with health insurance benefits. For all refugees arriving between 2001 and 2006 the ORR estimates the total unemployment rate for both males and females is 8.7%. They also estimate the unemployment rate for those arriving from Africa is higher at 9.6%. This compares to the unemployment rate of the entire United States of only 5% in 2006 (ORR, 2006).

In order for a refugee to find a job that pays well they must have some skills or education relevant to their desired occupation. 34% of African refugees reported they have not received a primary school degree and cite this as a problem when looking for employment (ORR, 2006). The average number of years of school for African refugees is 7.6 years. Having problems finding a job without an education is not unique to only Somali immigrants although it is more troublesome due to their general lack of formal education and language skills.

A lack of English proficiency also leads to lower incomes and a difficult time finding a job. According to the ORR, 8.9% of African refugees speak no English at all and about 2/3 speak English well. This leaves 1/4 of the

population at a distinct disadvantage when searching for employment because the ability to speak English fluently is essential to qualifying for a well paying job.

Finding affordable housing can be a difficult task for anyone new to a country, but can be even more difficult for those with little money. Being a Somali refugee can make this problem even more difficult and complicated due to their unfamiliarity of our culture and housing options. Not understanding the culture or language of a new place can make communicating ones needs very difficult, and it creates many issues when looking for an affordable home. Affordability is a key concern facing new immigrants since they have little money and they also do not have very well paying jobs when they first arrive in Minneapolis. Housing is defined as unaffordable when housing costs are more than 30% of a household's annual income (U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2009). When a family's housing costs are over this threshold they are considered cost burdened and may run in to trouble paying for other expenses such as food and clothing. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, 45% of renters are unable to afford a 2 bedroom rental unit based on HUDs affordability guidelines because the rental would be more than 30% of their income (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2009). The Minnesota Housing Partnership estimates that 13% of households in the Twin Cities pay more than half of their income on housing

(Minnesota Housing Partnership, 2009). Spending so much money on housing is an incredible burden to these families and leaves little money for other items that could make transitioning into a new country easier.

Religion is another factor that can make it difficult for Somalis when seeking refuge in the United States. Other immigrant communities may not face the same forms of discrimination Somalis face because of their Muslim religion. Somali refugees are overwhelmingly Sunni Muslims, and almost 100% of them follow the faith. The Somali constitution discourages promoting any religion other than Islam and it is doubtful there will be any changes in the makeup of religious beliefs among the Somali immigrants in the near future. In the post 9/11 world Muslims can face discrimination from people in the United States who do not understand the religion and are under the impression that all Muslims are terrorists. This type of discrimination may lead to some Somali refugees not being able to obtain housing because the landlords may see them, or just their name, and immediately reject their application for the rental. There are fair housing laws that prohibit this type of discrimination but many Somalis believe housing discrimination still exists. Another problem is that the Islam faith prohibits paying interest on loans. This makes it extremely difficult for Muslims to purchase a home because it prevents them from taking out a mortgage which requires paying interest. Somalis are left with no other

choice than to rent their properties from landlords who may or may not discriminate against them based on their religion.

4. Provider Interviews

I felt that the best way to find out what issues Somalis are facing when looking for affordable housing is to talk to people who help Somalis on a daily basis. I spoke to a few employees at the MPHA who are directly involved with some of the housing issues facing Somali immigrants in Minneapolis. The MPHA provides services for the large Somali population living in Minneapolis and it seemed to be the perfect place to research this information. This organization is the largest housing authority in Minnesota and provides over 5,800 low rent housing units which are spread throughout the city of Minneapolis. They also issue approximately 5,000 vouchers for the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program that can be used at any housing unit where the landlord accepts these vouchers (MPHA, 2009).

I spoke to two eligibility technicians whose primary responsibility is to find housing units for low income families. There are a few programs available to these low income families which include the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program and the Low Rent Housing Program. The Low Rent Housing Program provides subsidized rent for 41 high rise buildings, 736 single family homes and 184 townhomes (MPHA, 2009). The Section 8

Housing Choice Voucher Program gives the family more options when choosing where they want to live and would be better suited for many Somali families. With this program the family needs to find a suitable housing unit and, if the landlord accepts the voucher, they can live there and are only required pay rent equal to 30% of their household income. The voucher will cover the rest of the rent up to a level deemed appropriate by HUD. There is not as much flexibility with the Low Rent Program. This program entitles the family to reduced rent but their housing choices are limited to specific housing units. In Minneapolis, most of these are high-rise apartments such as those located in the Cedar Riverside area.

The eligibility technicians I spoke to dealt with many different nationalities but said that their Somali participants can have special needs that are more difficult than other participants. They informed me that many of the Somali families they interact with have housing needs that can be quite complicated. For instance, most Somali families consist of a large number of family members and would not fit comfortably in any normal two or even three bedroom housing unit. Some family units they mentioned can consist of upward of 10 family members who all would prefer to live in the same home. This factor alone makes it very difficult for the eligibility technicians to place these families because there simply are not housing units large enough to accommodate them. Because these types of housing units are not available, the families would like to have adjacent housing

units, but that also can be extremely difficult to find. The need for such a large home makes the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program the only viable solution as it increases the chance of obtaining a larger unit. Because of this, the chances of finding a suitable home for many Somali families are cut in half. The waiting list for the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program is very long and there are currently over 5,000 people on the high rise public waiting list (MPHA, 2009). Because the waiting list is so long for these units, some families must find other options. Some Somalis choose to live with friends or family members, or they go without any form of housing assistance. These options can make things extremely difficult for all families involved. Living in such tight quarters creates an unsafe and unhealthy environment which makes it difficult to be successful in work or at school. The eligibility technicians noted that they often felt the Somali families became very frustrated with the MPHA because they were not able to find a housing situation that they felt was good for them.

In addition to having difficulty finding large enough units to fit large Somali families, the eligibility technicians also voiced other concerns they had finding housing for Somali immigrants. They said many Somalis prefer housing that is near their friends and family members so they feel they are part of the larger Somali community. The eligibility technicians seemed to think this was a great benefit to the Somali families although it also created difficulty finding them housing given that there is only a limited supply of

housing in the areas requested. Living near people with similar backgrounds seemed to help Somalis feel accepted because the cultural norms of Somalis can be very different than those of Americans. Some examples mentioned were that Somalis do not like dogs touching them; they have different views on the male/female relationship, and do not seem to like elevators. Another problem facing some Somali families is that some of them feel they are being discriminated against because they are Somali, they have no credit, and they have never lived in a rental unit in the United States. Nearly all landlords require a background check so the families will have no chance of finding anywhere to live without help from public housing or another public assistance program. Making things worse, the eligibility technicians noted the Muslim faith of Somalis and how it prohibits paying interest on loans. This prevents them from taking out a mortgage and owning their own home. All of these problems facing Somali immigrants make finding housing difficult and frustrating. The eligibility technicians I spoke to felt that changes could be made in how the MPHA dealt with these families. The changes they would like to see ranged from having more support for dealing with Somali families to more resources available to provide more housing units to these families.

I also spoke to a housing inspector who seemed to have a unique view on how Somalis lived in their housing units. She said it was a very common occurrence to have more than the allowed number of people living in a

single unit. When confronted with the problem, she said she only got looks of confusion as if the family did not understand the problem. This inspector felt that on many occasions the family actually did understand that they were not supposed to have that many people in one unit but broke the rules anyways. This is a great example showing the need for more housing options for large Somali families and how the families are willing to help each other out when needed. This inspector also noted the potentially unsafe conditions these families were living in partly due to overcrowding. She noted the somewhat common occurrence of pest infestation and also mold growth which sometimes occurred under drapes hung over walls in some of the homes.

There is a variety of negative health outcomes associated with these poor housing conditions, regardless of ethnic background. Some health problems associated with poor housing include: development of asthma and allergies, exposure to lead and radon, and the many possible negative health outcomes associated with exposure to rodents and other pests. There have been numerous studies done showing how low income families are much more likely to live in poor housing conditions and are exposed to these potential negative health factors at alarming rates.

Lead exposure can have an extremely negative impact on the brain and nervous systems of young children. Lead is commonly found in older homes that used lead based paint. When the paint starts to chip, children

have been known to pick off the paint and ingest it. In addition to lead paint, there were also some homes built with lead pipes which can also lead to elevated lead levels. There are currently about 310,000 children with elevated levels of lead which could lead to brain damage (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005).

It has been proven that the presence of mold in a home can be one of the main causes for someone to develop asthma later on in life. This information is of concern to Somali immigrants because many of the homes available to lower income families are older homes that are more likely to contain mold. In a cohort study by Jaakkola (2005) it was found that exposure to mold can increase the incidence of asthma by up to two times the levels found in children living in homes without mold. Asthma is a disease many Somalis are aware of before coming to the United States because it is also quite common in Somalia. Traditional healing methods such as honey and butter are commonly used to treat asthma for many Somalis although there are many other treatments available in the United States.

The types of homes lower income families live in are also more prone to rodent or insect infestation. Rodent infestation can lead to a variety of diseases both directly and indirectly. A study by Bradman (2005) found that the likelihood of rodent infestation increased in the presence of peeling paint, water damage, and mold. The problems associated with rodent

infestation just add to the many other problems Somalis are facing while trying to live in subpar homes.

5. Community Organizations

When looking for help finding social services upon entering a new country it is important to have organizations available to help. Thankfully for the many Somalis coming to Minneapolis there are a large number of organizations focused on helping Somali refugees find the services they need. There are some organizations geared towards helping everyone regardless of ethnicity and others aimed specifically at helping Somalis. The organizations that are not Somali specifically aim to help refugees coming from any country to find housing, jobs, healthcare, and other welfare services if required. These organizations range from church run organizations to government run organizations and they vary in size and scope. One such organization is the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) which is part of the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services. The mission of the Office of Refugee Resettlement is to "...provide(s) people in need with critical resources to assist them in becoming integrated members of American society" (ORR, 2006). The ORR helps provide services to accomplish this mission with the help of a variety of agencies such as Church World Service and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service among many

others. They also provide grants and other resources to these organizations in an effort to fulfill their mission. The ORR does more than just assist refugees in finding affordable housing; they also provide statistics and other resources helpful in tracking what areas are most in need of resources. The purpose of this is to help track new refugees arriving in the United States and to use this information to be better prepared to help them.

In addition to the ORR, there are many organizations in the Somali community aimed at helping Somali refugees find the social services they need when first entering the United States. These organizations include; African Community Services, Confederation of Somali Communities in Minnesota, African Development Center, and Somali Education Center, among many others. These organizations all provide services to refugees in the Minneapolis metro area. Some services they provide are social service referrals, school information, English as a second language classes, and other services to help Somali refugees become successful in their new lives. While these services are a great resource for many refugees moving to Minneapolis, the number of different resources, each providing a different array of services, may make finding what these refugees need confusing and frustrating.

6. Recommendations

My recommendation to help Somali refugees find affordable housing not only focuses on improving housing, but on improving the overall health and wellbeing of the Somali Community. First, we need to consider that affordable housing may not be the only problem that needs to be addressed and could be one among many broader issues at hand. Somali refugees are coming to the United States with very little money, education, knowledge of English, and a variety of other barriers that prevent them from being able to afford adequate housing. To achieve the overall goal of self sufficiency for the Somali community we must be able to provide them with enough resources to give them a viable opportunity to succeed. For this reason, there must be programs in place to assist refugees in overcoming these barriers as well as in finding affordable housing. Thankfully, many organizations already provide many of these other services and it will be the responsibility of the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority to refer refugees to the organizations they need.

The Minneapolis Public Housing Authority needs to take a look at how they are currently helping people in the Somali community and see if they would better serve the community by forming stronger relationships with these other organizations. It may be helpful to the housing authority to enlist those who have dealt with the Somali community in the past and

create a group that meets regularly to ensure the housing authority is assisting the Somali community effectively. Although this group will not necessarily try to perform tasks other organizations already perform, it would be encouraged to work hand in hand with other refugee organizations to better serve the Somali community. There are already many different organizations aimed at helping refugees and this can make it difficult for Somali refugees to find their way through the system. This group could help navigate the system if necessary. This newly created group will be focused on helping Somalis find suitable housing and ensuring they provide contacts with other organizations if they need them. The focus should primarily be helping with housing because without a safe and stable place to live it makes it extremely difficult to deal with all the other obstacles they will be facing. Directing the refugees to other organizations that can help them find a job should be the second focus of this group since this task is already accomplished in other organizations.

This group will be in constant contact with all other Somali organizations and they will all work together whether it is providing references or help with any other needs they may have. This will allow greater collaboration between all organizations and will give Somalis access to more information. There would be little start up cost because the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority is already set up to help people find housing, so it would just require a small area of space dedicated to Somali

refugees. Working with the other agencies can be accomplished by ensuring every organization knows their role and provides references where necessary.

In order for this to work it would be helpful to have more eligibility technicians who strictly deal with Somalis. These additional technicians will work with the existing employees to gain a better understanding of what these refugees are going through and what their special needs are. Ideally, established Somali immigrants should be hired to deal with Somalis currently needing assistance because they have been through the same process themselves. The eligibility technician will also give the refugees hope because they will be dealing with someone that had the system work for them and they will see they too can be successful.

There should also be more housing units available to Somali immigrants, whether in the form of low rent high-rises, or with an expansion of the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program. An expansion of the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program would be more beneficial than expanding the low rent program. The Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program gives Somali families more flexibility with their housing choices and also gives them a better chance of finding something that suits their needs. This would give larger Somali families more options when looking for housing with multiple bedrooms that can accommodate all the family members they wish to live with. Also, this would prevent concentrating all

Somali immigrants in one area, such as the Cedar Riverside area. Although that area is preferred by many Somalis due to the large number of Somalis already there, I think they should expand into new communities as well. This will allow Somalis to spread out to different neighborhoods and could give them more opportunity to interact with other Minnesotans. I also believe there should be priority given to refugee families over non-disabled citizens because refugees are just starting out in the United States with very little money and naturally will not be able to afford much right away.

Expansion of the Section 8 Program is something that would be possible due to the recent changes at the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority. Due to their recent transition to a Moving to Work housing agency there is more flexibility in funding allocations. Under these new rules, they are able to be more flexible with where money coming from HUD is being spent and an expansion of Section 8 funding is a feasible way to spend this money. There is also the possibility of working with the City of Minneapolis or with the state to secure more funding for programs to help refugee families. If funding cannot be increased by obtaining more resources from HUD, the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority could move money from other programs into its housing choice voucher program to make this expansion a reality.

These recommendations assess the cultural needs of Somali immigrants by allowing them flexibility in their housing choices and giving

them freedom to continue to live by their cultural beliefs. The Somali group at the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority will understand the culture of Somalis and will be able to assist them in finding housing and directing them to other agencies for any other needs they may have. The Section 8 Program participants can choose which rental unit they want in order to ensure the housing unit will not conflict with their cultural beliefs and needs. Another important aspect of the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program is that interest payments are not paid by the participants. This is important because most Somalis are Muslim and Islamic law prohibits loans with interest payments.

The development of the Somali group will also take great care in being culturally competent in regards to the Somali community. The employees working in this group will primarily be Somali immigrants themselves so they will have thorough knowledge of the Somali community as a whole and will be sensitive to their needs. This will allow the eligibility technicians to be selective of where they place immigrants so they do not put them in a situation they are not comfortable with. These recommendations will provide the greatest benefit to the Somali community while staying culturally appropriate so they will not compromise the beliefs of those receiving assistance.

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